

Sentences: Types, and Common Mistakes

Sentences are classified as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. This designation is based on the clauses used to create the sentence.

Clauses:

Every clause must have a subject and a verb. There are two types of clauses: independent and dependent (subordinate).

An independent clause contains a subject, a verb, and expresses a complete thought. It is able to stand independently.

Example: The class is hard.

A dependent (subordinate) clause contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought, and, therefore, cannot be left alone. If a subordinate clause is left alone, a fragment will result. These clauses depend on independent clauses to express a complete thought.

Example: If the class is hard,

Sentence Types:

A simple sentence is one independent clause with no subordinate clauses.

Example: The statue is in the garden.

A compound sentence has two or more independent clauses and no subordinate clauses. The two clauses are joined by either a coordinating conjunction or a semicolon.

Coordinating Conjunctions (**f**or, **a**nd, **n**or, **b**ut, **o**r, **y**et, **s**o) can be easily recalled by learning the acronym FANBOYS.

Example: I finished reading the book, and I returned it to the library.
The girls went to the store; they bought new shoes.

A complex sentence consists of one independent clause with one subordinate clause.

Example: *When the teacher spoke*, the students were silent.

A compound-complex sentence has at least two independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause.

Example: *Because the students work hard*, they will pass, and they will be happy.
The class was difficult; however, the students will pass *because they worked hard*.

Common Sentence Errors:

Subject-Verb Agreement:

The subject of a sentence specifies who or what the sentence is about. The subject consists of a simple subject and a complete subject. The simple subject is the main noun or pronoun that the sentence is about. The complete subject consists of the simple subject and all the words that modify it.

Examples: The blue shoes are on the shelf.

In this sentence the simple subject is “shoes.” The complete subject is “the blue shoes.”

Subject-Verb Agreement relies on both the subject and verb being either singular or plural.

Incorrect: The students was late for class.

In this sentence, the subject “students” is plural while the verb “was” is singular.

Correct: The students were late for class.

In this sentence, both the subject “students” and the verb “were” are plural. Thus, the subject and verb are in agreement.

Incorrect: Jessica take the bus to school.

In this sentence, the subject “Jessica” is singular while the verb “take” is plural.

Correct: Jessica takes the bus to school.

In this sentence, both the subject “Jessica” and the verb “takes” are singular. Thus the subject and verb are in agreement.

Fragments:

A sentence fragment is a word group that is attempting to function as a sentence but lacking an independent clause. In some circumstances, they can be easy to notice, but when placed near related sentences, it can become more difficult.

Example: The colony in the north.

There is no verb present to make the statement a complete thought.

I gathered the materials from all of the usual places. *The same databases and newspapers.*

In the second part of this example, there is no verb present to complete the thought.

Therefore, “the same databases and newspapers” is a fragment.

Run-ons:

A run-on sentence occurs when independent clauses are not joined correctly. Run-on sentences are occasionally referred to as fused sentences. In a fused sentence, the two independent clauses are joined with no punctuation mark or coordinating conjunction.

Example: The family drove to the beach it was a beautiful day.

In this sentence, the two independent clauses are combined without using the correct punctuation or conjunction.

Corrections: The family drove to the beach; it was a beautiful day.
The family drove to the beach, and it was a beautiful day.

To correct these sentences, one may use either a semicolon or a comma with a coordinating conjunction.

Comma splices are another common error that create run-on sentences. A comma splice occurs when two or more independent clauses are joined by a comma without a coordinating conjunction.

Example: The baby is in his crib, he is sleeping.

In this sentence, the two independent clauses are combined using only a comma.

Correction: The baby is in his crib; he is sleeping.
The baby is in his crib, and he is sleeping.
To correct these sentences, one may use either a semicolon or a comma with a coordinating conjunction.

Modifiers:

A modifier is an adjective, an adverb, a phrase, or a clause acting as an adjective or adverb. A modifier provides the reader with further information about the word or phrase a modifier modifies.

Limiting modifiers limit or restrict the meaning of a word or phrase within the sentence. These modifiers should be placed directly in front of the word they modify. Common Limiting modifiers include *only*, *even*, *almost*, *nearly*, and *just*.

Example: We go out for ice cream only when we win the game.

Misplaced Modifiers occur when it is unclear what the modifier is modifying. It is important to make sure the meaning of modifiers is clear when forming a sentence. Misplaced modifiers can lead to misreadings and ambiguity.

Example: An apple pie sat on the table that Claire had baked.
In this sentence, it is unclear what the modifier “that Claire had baked” is modifying.

Correction: An apple pie that Claire had baked sat on the table.

A split infinitive occurs when a modifier is placed between the two parts of an infinitive. When the modifier is a long word or phrase, splitting the infinitive can create an awkward sentence. Splitting the infinitive is occasionally necessary, however, when rewording, this creates an equally awkward sentence.

Incorrect Example: I hope to soon see the document.

Correction: I hope to see the document soon.

OR

I hope soon to see the document.

Acceptable Split Infinitive: I plan to really enjoy my vacation.

This split infinitive would be acceptable because the alternative, “I plan to enjoy really my vacation,” would be awkward.

Dangling Modifiers are word groups that do not immediately follow or precede the noun it describes.

Example: Walking on the beach, the water touched my feet.

In this sentence, the modifier “Walking on the beach” appears to modify the water.

Correction: While I was walking on the beach, the water touched my feet.

Exercises

Identify the following as independent or dependent clauses:

I like to read. _____

When she goes to school. _____

It was a very good year. _____

Staying alive. _____

Come over tomorrow night. _____

With your jive talking. _____

Identify the following sentences as simple, complex, or compound:

My house is very spacious. _____

We went to the restaurant, and we ate a tasty dinner. _____

In the summer time, the weather is hot. _____

Bill has a math test on Monday, so he must study hard this weekend. _____

Since I can't have you, I don't want anybody else. _____

Correct the following sentence fragments:

Sarah who is short. _____.

The people and places in the city. _____.

Two of the students in my class. _____.

When I go shopping. _____.

The commercial on television. _____.

Correct the following Run-ons:

The commercial was funny it was about a clown. _____.

Jake was sick he went to the doctor. _____.

Maria took a trip to Florida she had a lot of fun. _____.

The computer was broken I tried to fix it. _____.

My parents love to travel I go with them sometimes. _____.

Correct the following Comma Splices:

Marie Curie discovered radium, she applied her work to medicine. _____.

Jake does not realize his illness is serious, he needs to alter his diet. _____.

I went to the zoo, I saw elephants there. _____.

The dog played outside, he was there all day. _____.

My car would not start, I went to get it fixed. _____.

Correct the following Limiting Modifiers:

We can go shopping even if we have to go to school. _____.

I like chocolate ice cream just as much as I like vanilla. _____.

Correct the following Misplaced Modifiers:

My cell phone sat on the table which rang all night long. _____.

My sister ate the cake who is very tall. _____.

The table was broken that was made out of wood. _____.

Correct the following Spilt Infinitives:

I did not have more to do than I could handle. _____.

I will only have to do the work once. _____.

I was hesitant mostly because I had not talked to John in a while. _____.

Correct the following Dangling Modifiers:

Sitting on the chair, the cat scratched the material._____.

Eating in the kitchen, the sandwich was good._____.

Running in the park, my shoes began to hurt._____.

Answers

Identify the following as independent or dependent clauses:

I like to read. independent

When she goes to school. dependent

It was a very good year. independent

Staying alive. dependent

Come over tomorrow night. independent

With your jive talking. dependent

Identify the following sentences as simple, complex, or compound:

My house is very spacious. Simple

We went to the restaurant, and we ate a tasty dinner. Compound

In the summer time, the weather is hot. Complex

Bill has a math test on Monday, so he must study hard this weekend. Compound

Since I can't have you, I don't want anybody else. Complex

For acceptable corrections of remaining sentence exercises, please see writing tutor.